

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued weekly. Subscription price, \$2.50 per year. Entered as second class matter at the N. Y. Post Office by STREET & SMITH.

No. 44

NEW YORK, October, 30, 1897.

Price 5 Cents.



WITH A VIGOROUS SLAM THE OPEN HALF TOP WENT DOWN AND THE YOUNG DETECTIVE WAS TRAPPED.

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Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1897 by Street & Smith, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress,
Washington, D. C.
Entered as second class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office.
Subscription price, \$2.50 per year.

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No 44. STREET & SMITH, Publishers. NEW YORK. 29 Rose St., N. Y. 5 Cents

NICK CARTER'S MAGIC HAND;

OR,

The Crime of the Chinese Nighbinders.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A PANE OF GLASS.

"The right door or the left door—
which?"

In the very heart of the great city, a
face to face with the mystery of his
city, asked the question.

He stood at the street entrance to a
broken-down frame building. Dusk was
gathering, and he had to peer closely to
make out what lay beyond the top step
where he balanced, hesitating.

He was breathless, and his face was
red, but it was apparent, rather from
reasons of overwhelming eagerness or
anxiety than with fear or excitement.

For ten minutes he had been following
a man, up this street, down that one,
loitering, lurking—a man who went fast
with caution and watchfulness, and
the man had turned in here.

"I must act quickly," pronounced the
boy, his eyes snapping. "He went
through one of these two doorways, each
leading into a different building. If I take
the wrong one, it's disaster. The right
one—who knows? In a dilemma like this
I would he say—the man who directs
the great master who has his finger

continually on the criminal pulse of New
York city?"

The speaker fluttered like a ferret,
every nerve on the razor edge of the keenest
suspense.

Eyes, face, hands, were in a sympathetic
quiver with the thoughts that ran
riot through his quick-acting brain.

A physiognomist studying the vivid
pose of that moment would have told you
that the most transparent elements of a
strong nature were here in play, that this
boy had one evident qualification—that
he was, if nothing else, a natural born de-
tective.

For he had the eye of an eagle, the
clear-cut nostrils of a bloodhound, the
sharp-shaped ear that gives the woodland
deer its keenest sense of hearing, while
his fingers, steel-knit, yet delicate, sug-
gested that strength and daintiness com-
bined that car with equal celerity snap
the handcuffs deftly across the burglar's
brawny wrists, or gracefully adjust my
lady's diamond bracelet.

"The right door or the left door—
which?" again projected the boy, almost
irritably now. "Seconds are golden. I
must decide. This!"

He caught at a knob almost haphazard,

for it was a gamester's choice. The door gave, he glided noiselessly across the threshold, softly pushed the door to again, and then all was still.

A person taking a survey from the street of the structure that had now swallowed up man and boy, would have been somewhat puzzled as to its uses.

It looked gloomy and forbidding in the extreme. Way over in one wing occasional flashes suggested some kind of light manufacturing going on about a portable forge—nearer the west end, where a shed-like roof slanted to a narrow court, lights showed at three windows, but heavy shades obscured an interior view, as if the occupants of the rooms beyond courted an unusual seclusion.

It was just that hour when the city's roar and din subside for a spell, to be re-awakened soon by clattering cab, rattling patrol wagon and the turmoil of gay theatre crowds. A mystic hush lay over this nearly deserted street—a mere cobblestoned vein running less than two hundred yards from a brilliantly lighted main artery of traffic.

Suddenly, sharply, a fearful clatter broke in upon this stillness, and a thousand tiny echoes made the air vibrate.

The roof of the high shed ran four feet below two windows in the third story of the building. One of these had bulged out, framework and all, as if blown from place by an explosive gust.

The sashes struck the shed roof with a thud, and went shying clumsily down the slant, attended by a prismatic shower of broken glass.

Every pane had been shattered. Then through the blank aperture made by design or accident, a form came into view, dropped over the window frame like a swift shadow, ducked as some missile skimmed the air, and with a squatting pose that threw all the weight on the feet and these forward like sled runners, started sliding down the incline. It was the boy who had made the choice between the two street doors.

At the window he had just sprung through almost instantly appeared a second form. A fierce, bearded face peered after him. It was that of the man he had followed to this spot. The shadower had opened the right door, it seemed—had

found his quarry and was speeding away again.

Why? Not from fear, for his eager face was one glow of boyish triumph. He was coatless now, but the stripped off garment inclosed something square, the size of a school slate, which he held straight out before him with both hands as he slid.

Down the planks he skimmed like a toboggan sled, over the roof's lowest edge he went recklessly. It was a ten-foot drop to the sidewalk.

He struck it with a slam that must have tingled his soles mightily. The shock did not unnerve him, however. He seemed simply anxious to keep from falling, to maintain a safe balance on the covered-up something extended rigidly still by his two hands.

A shout that was a snarl rang out from the window. The man who uttered it disappeared. From inside the house sounded next a clatter, as if some one was descending a flight of stairs four steps at a time.

The boy wavered where he stood for a single moment, looked quickly all about him, and then on a circling detour that took him as far out into the street as possible from the double entrance he had turned, dashed in the direction of the nearest main thoroughfare.

"Got it!" he breathed, in a gasp that was half a cheer. "The first clew. Where will they say to this? Too bad! I was as quick, but he was quicker."

He had passed the double entrance with a breath of relief, but now his feet sought wings, for out through it as it swung came the man he had followed thither.

Neither spoke a word. Just one sourd sharp and rapid, rose and fell to the touch of double heel and toe—kloppetty-kloppetty-klop, kloppetty-klop, kloppetty-klop.

Once something glinted, vicious as a new awe inspiring to the swift, curdled glass seen the boy in the lead flung behind him. It was a drawn weapon in the hand of the pursuer.

The latter, however, changed any intended purpose of this form of assault when they neared the main street. At its corner stood two brawny policemen in uniform, engaged in conversation.

"Stop that boy!" bawled the man, excitedly.

"Eh! What's this?" demanded one of the officers, starting into action.

He put out a foot to trip the forward runner. The latter dodged. The other officer made a quick and clever spring. He clutched his fat, stout fingers about the vest collar of the runner, who came to a halt with a shock and an utterance of alarm and dismay.

"Let me go!" he panted. "That man—arrest him. I'll tell you who he is, I'll——"

"That man! Where is he now, I wonder?" gaped his captor, staring back.

"He's vanished, he's hid. Don't that show he's afraid to face honest people?" flared the boy. "Please don't detain me. He'll get through to my course some place else, and stop me."

"You'll have to explain, youngster," remarked the other officer. "And what's that you're hiding so tenderly?"

He made a careless swing of his club toward the object the boy held out straight before him.

"Don't! don't!" almost shouted its possessor. "It's only—a pane of glass."

"Eh? Say! A pane of—— Are you running on some kind of a wager? A pane of—— Hello!"

The captive had wriggled to get free, to evade anything touching his precious parcel, as if it was some incalculable treasure.

These movements tore his vest suddenly open. Clear to the shoulder, swung one lap, revealing pinned to the negligé shirt beneath a small silver badge.

His captor looked once wonderingly and released his grasp; closer, and then stared the boy squarely in the face.

"Aha!" he said, simply. "You are all right."

"I am Phil Marcy——"

"A new one, but I remember now having seen you before. On business?"

"Of the greatest importance."

"A pane of glass!" interpolated the other officer, lost in a mixture of amusement and wonder.

"Can we do anything for you?" questioned his fellow, in a tone of earnest respect. "I'm Prescott. Tell your friend

that. He'll remember me. He put me here—bless him!"

"Just let me make up for lost time; just nab that man who was following me if you run across him, that's all."

"We'll see you safely home——"

"No, I'm in too much of a hurry for that. Thank you. Good-by."

Down the street sped the boy again. He took its centre, now free of teams, and was enabled a clear course.

Before him still he held the coat-covered square, and after him silently for a moment the two officers stared.

"I say, Prescott," finally remarked the one who had tried to trip up the fugitive, "is he the chief himself that you treat him as if he had the freedom of the city?"

"No," announced the other, shortly, "only he's all right."

"Is he, now?"

"Every time. I remember him now, and the badge he wore settled it for me."

"Who is he, if I may ask, and you'll tell me?"

"Nick Carter's cleverest protege."

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST CLUE.

Nick Carter's cleverest protege!

No further explanation was necessary for the wondering police officer. Nick Carter!—a name to conjure by, surely, he realized that; with one backward sweep of memory, taking in the famous record of that remarkable detective.

A protege—that implied the protection, the practical endorsement of the great mystery-solver. Yes, the boy with the pane of glass was "all right," indeed!

Phil Marcy he had called himself, and both officers made a mental note of it. They had heard of Nick Carter's new idea of founding a detective school, with young material to work on, directed by experience, ability and originality of method, and, favorably impressed with the manly, intelligent face of their late prisoner, they doubted not but that with the added prestige of Nick's skilled tutelage, they would some day read that name written high on the scroll of meritorious detective achievement.

Meantime, the object of their interest

had made good use of his re-acquired freedom. His eyes were everywhere as he darted down the street, but they grew less apprehensive as he neared his destination.

"Home!" he spoke, relievedly, letting down on his pace as he entered the long hall of Nick Carter's headquarters. "It was a run—it was a risk, but it was worth it. Now to get back breath and nerves, and then to tell my story."

Phil seated himself in a chair near a half open door. It looked into a roomy apartment, and light and the hum of energetic voices came out into the hall.

Phil placed his package carefully on the floor by his side, and stretched his arms luxuriously. Their rigid pose of half an hour or more had been a great strain on even his practiced muscles.

His fine face glowed with unmistakable enthusiasm as he took up the package again. He brushed aside its coat covering, and placed the inclosure across his knees.

A pane of glass was revealed—only a pane of glass. It was somewhat begrimed, as if it had come from poor quarters. Around its edges were patches of hardened putty. To all appearances it had just been cut hastily and rudely from a sash.

There were too many startling circumstances connected with its possession, too much of importance associated with the positive figure it cut in a certain case he was about to discuss with his guide and associates, for Phil to break in upon the coterie in the next room helter skelter. He had learned patience and prudence from the great detective. He exercised both now, and listened in a pleased, soothed way to the voices that floated upon the air.

He could recognize them all—the kindly, measured accents of Nick, indulgent and encouraging ever when with his proteges; the sharp, curious tones of the pupil who had come to regard the detective sphere as a veritable wonderland, and was always pestering Nick with questions; the occasional comments of three of the more experienced of the crowd, who had won considerable laurels, and "were above small talk."

A lazy, drawling voice struck Phil as

if a brad-awl had pierced him. He winced and looked discomposd.

"Burt Newton," he muttered, "I know he was not here just now. He's always jeering at me, always making small talk about anything I do."

Burt was a new acquisition to the detective's household. Nick was a broad-minded man, and on the theory that as there are different kinds of criminals, so does it take different kinds of detectives to catch them, he had taken upon his tutelage a varied lot of material.

Burt was the son of a wealthy banker. He had seen the world pretty thoroughly, in his own imagination, and "up to all the wrinkles" of both high and low life.

He had done indifferent service as a clerk in his father's bank, as a society porter, as the backer of an amateur pugilist, was a crack tennis player, had appeared on the amateur minstrel stage with great eclat—in fact, to his individual way of thinking, was about "as ripe as the apple to make them!"

One day a messenger boy of the bank was tempted to abscond with a few dollars. The officials did not deign to follow up so trivial a matter, but Burt gained permission to do so.

His elaborate disguise, preparation of telegrams and the like used up ten times the amount embezzled. He ran down his game—sneaking back from some country town, penniless and contrite, in a blaze of glory he dragged the luckless urchin to the bank. Then his true mission in life suddenly dawned upon him—he would be a detective.

His father's influence prevailed on Nick to try him. A trying time ensued. All the morning Burt would repeat the details of his wonderful embezzler capture, and all the afternoon he would intrude his theories on this and that discussion which came up.

"I'll make something of him in time. Let him have his natural swing for the present," Nick had remarked to Phil, and the latter had confidence enough in his patron and model to believe in him, and tolerate the boy who considered pert slang and swagger the first crowning qualification of any up-to-date professional.

He was talking now, and Phil listened with a bored expression of face.

"See here, fellows," Burt was saying, "I'm not the kind of a detective you read about in story books. I've got a system, I have. Theory—that's my strong point. Give me the outlines of a case. I take it like a chemist—I dissect it, I analyze it. It is not the rough-and-tumble that works the case out, it's the theorizing."

"Then you don't believe in outside active work?" inquired one of Burt's comrades.

"Oh, yes, I do. Leave that to what I call the acrobats of the profession. Now, Phil's one of that kind."

"You evidently aim to be what is called an office detective—a sort of consulting official," insinuated Nick, softly.

"Call it what you like, but I get there on my system. Didn't I prove to you last week that there is a regular language to the wiggings of a cat's tail? Good. Didn't I insist that you can tell a convict every time by the drag of his foot, the close fit of his cap, the way he holds a door knob, just as he does the door bar when he's locked into his cell? No, I don't believe in spilling your head over hunting and shadowing and spotting till you've got a theory. That's my finish, and I say that in the Leslie case, which the police have dropped as unfathomable, the fellow who so mysteriously disappeared has just done what thousands of others have done—got despondent and suicided. I've reasoned it out. I consider the man's tastes, his habits, his peculiarities. He simply walked out to some pier on a dark night and shuffled off the burden of life. Now Phil has been crazy over that affair. He's taken a great interest in it. What's he been doing for three weeks? Hunting clews."

"Which are an excellent thing in their way," suggested Nick.

"Yes, when there's any to find. Has Phil found any so far?"

"Yes—the first!"

Phil had entered the room. He looked flustered, like a novice facing his first audience, but even embarrassment could not hide the dignity of confidence, the depth of purpose that his features reflected from his strongly working mind.

Nick Carter smiled a quick welcome upon his favorite, and this reassured him. Larry Moore, the curious boy of the crowd, got up near to him with a rapt, eager look, as if Phil was a big barrel of interesting information, and he was anxious to tap him.

The three other boys in the room exhibited a fair surprise only. They considered themselves veterans quite, and tried not to appear disturbed at anything.

Burt Newton's incredulous gaze was Phil's greatest burden. He looked solemn and winked at the others. He smiled pityingly, and vouchsafed direct to Phil.

"The first clew? I guess it isn't startling enough to put any bristles on our spines."

"That depends on how you take it," returned Phil, calmly. "Mr. Carter," he went on, holding the pane of glass behind him and addressing himself to the detective, "three weeks ago I came to you and asked you to make a detective of me."

"Which you have demonstrated in a most practical way—if shrewdness and perseverance count for anything—will not be a very difficult matter," spoke Nick, encouragingly.

"Thank you," murmured Phil, with some emotion. "I told you then I had a purpose in coming, outside of adopting a profession which you had lifted to a level of honor. I asked you not to question me as to whom I was or where I came from."

"In other words, the mysterious detective act!" railed Burt.

"You put your kind, fatherly hand on my shoulder," proceeded Phil, in a low tone, "and said my face was enough for you; that if I thought I had a destiny to work out in which secrecy was necessary, you had confidence enough in my words to judge I knew best. Thank you, sir, thank you!"

Nick tried to smile in an off-hand way, but looked affected and interested instead.

"A week previous to my coming here," resumed Phil, "the Leslie case came up, and some of the boys were working on it. Arnold Leslie, a young stock broker, disappeared suddenly from his office. Not a clew, not a motive could be traced by the police."

A reward was offered. That is what the boys were working for—all except Burt

here," supplemented Phil; "he has been theorizing."

"I say——" began Burt, stormily, but Nick quieted the turbulent and affronted amateur with a wave of his hand.

"Go on, Phil," directed the detective.

"Well, I felt as if I would like to do something that would be creditable, and I made the case my study. Wealthy, happily-situated young men don't leave the world in Leslie's way without a motive or a reason. He was simply blotted out. The police came to the dead wall of 'no clew,' and gave it up. Last night I made my twentieth odd visit to the home of the old lady where Leslie formerly lodged. She gave me a valuable piece of information."

Even Burt looked interested now. As to Larry, he was fairly wriggling with excitement.

"She told me, and she is prepared to swear to it," continued Phil, "that at nine o'clock last night she happened to glance up at the windows of the room Leslie formerly occupied. To her amazement a light showed. To her thorough stupefaction, she saw plainly—paler, thinner, but entirely recognizable—the missing broker. A fierce-eyed, black-bearded man held one arm. She uttered a shriek. The light went out. She fainted. When she went up to the room she found its door open and everything disturbed as if a hasty search had been engaged in."

"This is startling, Phil," commented Nick, gravely.

"All day long I have been looking for the man she described—the black-whiskered fellow. I struck him at dusk."

"Good!"

"I followed him. He led me to a building where he disappeared. I entered it. I got into a room probably, one of his, surely one where he now has or last night had the missing man, Arnold Leslie."

"How do you know that?" demanded Burt.

"Because, by the merest chance, about to lift a window to open a way to escape if detected, against the street lights I observed some letters, some words, plainly scratched across a pane."

"With——"

"A diamond, and Arnold Leslie, according to description, wore one on his right

hand. One glance told me what a clew had struck. That pane contained a message."

"To whom?"

"To the police, to the world, and it was signed 'Arnold Leslie.'"

"And the message itself?" inquired Nick.

"I did not read it, but you shall now. It proves that the missing man is alive?"

"Yes?"

"Kidnaped—held by force?"

"Probably."

"Ah, what deep motives must underlie the case, then!" cried Phil, enthused with professional zeal. "I cut the pane out; I was detected by the man I had followed. I kicked out a window, barely escaped, and got here. There is the pane."

There was a craning of necks as Phil placed the pane of glass on a table in the centre of the room.

He tilted it against some books so all could see it. It was grimy, but the white, grainy tracings of letters, words, were plainly distinguishable.

The veteran detective was moved out of the ordinary, but he displayed no emotion by words.

Coming up to the pane he scrutinized it closely.

"'Arnold Leslie,' " he spelled out, "and it is his handwriting."

"How do you know?" ventured Burt.

"That curved capital fits to the style of the signature to a letter I saw recently in his handwriting."

Nick got nearer to inspect the body of the queer scrawl.

"'I am a prisoner,' " he read slowly, "'in deadly peril of my life. I beg whoever reads this to inform my friends that I am a victim of——' Why! what is this strange declaration?"

It was plain to see that Nick was deeply startled. He drew back with an incredulous jerk.

It was well that he did so. Slight as was the movement, it took him out of range of the open window of the room, and that saved his life.

For at just that moment a vague presence hovered there. A flash dazzled, a sharp report rang out.

Fairly, squarely across the room sped a bullet, striking the direct centre of the

tell-tale message, and the precious window pane, shattered to a hundred pieces, flew in a dozen different directions.

CHAPTER III.

ACTION.

"Action!" shouted Nick, promptly, and every boy in the room knew what he meant.

Like trained soldiers, as the detective hurriedly spoke a succinct direction to each in turn, even to the theorizing Burt, the last one of them did something, and did it without delay.

One sprang through the window leading into the yard through which the shot had just been fired; another dropped through a rear door. Phil ran for the front. Within the space of sixty seconds the house had been completely surrounded, and not a known avenue of exit was left unguarded.

All watched in vain, however. There was a sharp whistle after the lapse of five minutes.

"We're called in," remarked Larry, who had kept close to Phil's side.

"Yes," nodded the latter. "He's got away. It was certainly the man who tried to stop me before. Well, he's accomplished his purpose. Mr. Carter, is it entirely destroyed?"

Phil ruefully propounded the query as he re-entered the room they had so summarily left. The detective, on his knees on the floor, was trying to piece out the shattered pane.

"He had a good aim," muttered Nick. "It's splinters, not pieces. We'll never make much out of that jumble."

"And you had not read it?" said Phil, regretfully.

"Half of it. No long faces, lad! As it is, we've got one piece of valuable information."

"What?" demanded Burt.

"A startling and mystifying piece of information," added Nick, seriously. "Thus far I read: 'I am a prisoner, in deadly peril of my life. I beg whoever reads this to inform my friends that I am a victim of——'"

"Yes! yes!" palpitated Phil.

"The Chinese Highbinders."

"What?" projected the bewildered Phil.

"The dickens!" exploded Burt, for once too dazed to offer the faintest of theories.

"Why, Mr. Carter! What a peculiar statement!" commented little Larry.

"We must make the most of it, for that is all we have to go on. Well, it is a new lead and a definite one. Now then, my friends, put on your thinking caps. Phil has evolved two great points: Arnold Leslie is alive. He is the victim of the Chinese Highbinders. Why?"

It was a way the detective had to close up like a clam when a serious problem confronted him. His young assistants knew it would not do to disturb him when in this mood.

Two of the boys subsided to seats and joined their chief in his ruminations. Burt went out into the hall. There he found Phil pacing it up and down restlessly, immersed in thought.

"I say," he ventured. "I've a theory——"

"Don't want it."

"On my first detective case——"

"Oh, you're a used-to-be!" muttered Phil, pettishly.

"I'm not a never-was, anyway. Huh! Think you own the Leslie case? I've a good mind to take it up myself."

"Do."

Burt retired in disgust. He tried to get Larry to listen to a wonderful "theory" he had concerning opium smuggling and the like, but Larry was too engrossed anxiously watching his friend Phil to pay any attention.

He came forward as Phil picked up his cap and started for the door as if a sudden idea impelled him.

"Hold on, Phil," he urged. "Where are you going?"

"To find that man."

"The one who fired the shot?"

"The black-whiskered fellow, yes. He's the hinge on which everything moves at present. Tell Mr. Carter I'll report before midnight."

Larry stared wistfully after Phil. Then he made a grab for his own cap. Phil, too occupied to notice him, ran down the steps.

He started straight back for the old building where he had secured the diamond-traced window pane. He knew

enough about criminals to guess that he might not find the black-whiskered man there, but he might learn something of his identity. He must make a definite start somewhere, and this seemed the only point that was promising.

"The puzzler is, what can the Chinese Highbinders have to do with a man like Arnold Leslie?" reflected Phil. "It's baffling. It's almost incredible. As to the rest of the case, the fellow I shadowed is in charge of Leslie. There's some deep plot under it all, of course. Here's a mystery with a vengeance. Will I ever be able to work it out?"

Phil reached the court where the old building was located. He first lurked in a convenient doorway and studied its front. There was nothing very enlightening in a half hour's survey of the place. No one entered. No one came out.

"Of course the nest is empty," he cogitated. "No man, knowing that Nick Carter is likely too be on his trail, would come back to his lair, even for a minute."

Phil decided to boldly enter the place and make some inquiries. Then he changed his mind and concluded to adopt more cautious tactics.

He left the street, planning what he would do, penetrated a narrow space between two buildings, and finally found himself in the rear yard of the double house that was his objective point of investigation.

It was littered with barrels, boxes, old timber, a wagon or two, and near a central fire plug stood a street sprinkler, its hose attached, made ready for filling for an early morning round.

"Hello!" ejaculated Phil, suddenly.

He started into the keenest interest, as he looked across the shed roof down which he had slid an hour previous.

As his eyes casually lifted to the window he had smashed out and escaped through, Phil became aware that there was a faint radiance in the room beyond.

"It comes from the second apartment whence the black-whiskered man came rushing," theorized Phil. "Some one is in there. The lower sash is curtained. If I could peep over! The very thing."

Phil climbed up the side of the high sprinkler butt. Half its top was thrown

back. He perched on this, tip-toed, and quivered.

"It's him!" breathed Phil. "He's a venturesome scoundrel. He's packing a valise. Out goes the light. Why, he's coming out the back way!"

A form crossed a rear porch and came down the stairs rapidly. In his trepidation Phil started to get out of sight, and moving to step over the side of the wagon, found his clothing caught in a hook. The man was on the last step now. To drop to the ground was a futile scheme. Phil gently slipped over the edge of the top and into the sprinkler.

There was a light splash as he landed in several inches of water. Phil had not intended to go lower than out of range, but he had lost his purchase.

He listened for a minute. Footsteps crossed the yard planking. Then they stopped.

"I mustn't lose sight of him," declared Phil.

He was just reaching up to seize the side of the butt, to venture a peep at least, when he fell back with a muffled utterance of dismay.

"He saw me!" gulped Phil.

Yes, the man had certainly seen him—the man had determined to give him his quietus. He must have crept noiselessly to the wagon and mounted a wheel, for with a vigorous slam the open half top went down; with a click its outside fastening shot into place.

Here was a pretty story to tell to his associates! mused Phil. Trapped like a novice! Ah! but here was something else that promised to give that story a far different ending, and Phil felt cold shivers run all over him.

A splurt of water sounded hollow and sudden at his side, and its contact knocked him over.

"The wretch!" shouted Phil, in a frenzied tone.

He began to scream at the top of his voice as he realized his perilous predicament. The man he had shadowed had left him a vivid reminder of his heartless personality. He had given the hydrant wrench a pull, and the sprinkling butt was filling.

Phil felt the cold water creep up inch by inch. He kept on shouting, but he

doubted if anything but a vague, hollow echo penetrated the outside air.

Up to his waist, beyond his waist it came; it reached his neck. There must be a vent somewhere! Clear up to the top, he decided, with a sinking heart, as his head was submerged.

He tried to float. Tip-toeing gave him a momentary respite. Then Phil gave up, for, choked and blinded, he felt his knees weaken and his senses become blurred.

What was that sound? It vibrated the wagon. Phil struggled upright. A swishing echo met his hearing.

"It's stopped, it's going down, the water!" he fluttered. "Why, Larry!"

Open came the cover. The most welcome face Phil had ever greeted looked down anxiously.

"Are you there, Phil Marcy?" its owner queried. "I thought that fellow would never go. Take my hand."

"You followed me——" began Phil, as he was dragged out from what had so nearly proved a death-pit.

"Are you sorry? Say, does a little thing like that count as real detective work?"

"A little thing! Does it count? Oh, you jewel! The man has gone?"

"Bolted through the buildings yonder."

Phil stood dripping and ruminating. Then gratitude made place for the ever-present professional instinct Nick had instilled.

"Scarcely any use trying to follow the man," he said. "There's the den, though. That may tell us something."

He went up the rear stairs, Larry following him, and entered an open doorway near the shattered window frame.

Groping his way into a room, Phil came to a halt, and called to Larry.

"Got a match?"

"Yes."

"Give us some light. We'll probably find a lamp here."

At that moment something clutched his hair and jerked him back.

At the same time a cracked, gleeful voice croaked into Phil's startled ear:

"The Chinese Highbinders—Arnold Leslie! Hooray! It's a million dollar spec, and no mistake!"

CHAPTER IV.

T W E N T Y - T W O .

"What's that?" voiced little Larry, in a frightened gulp.

Phil did not answer. He stood stock still, wondering. His hair was held in a tightening clutch. The hoarse croaking tones somewhat startled him.

He expected a blow next, but it did not come. There was no doubt but that he had stumbled across some accomplice or acquaintance of the black-whiskered man, for the voice that had just spoken had alluded distinctly to that individual's undeniable main themes of interest, the Chinese Highbinders, Arnold Leslie.

Suddenly the grip on Phil's hair was released. There came instantly following a sliding scrape of talon-like fingers along his cheek, and he was electrified by a new utterance.

"Go on, now! Darley, you're a genius! Bag the outfit. A cool million. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Gracious!" muttered Larry, sliding back for the open door.

"Hold on!" ordered Phil, bracing up suddenly. "Where's that match?"

Larry's quavering voice directed him. Groping fingers met. Phil flared the lucifer.

"I thought it," he spoke, quite composedly.

"Thought what?" asked Larry, staring where Phil stared. "My! I supposed it was a man."

"So did I, at first."

"And it isn't?"

"You see for yourself."

"A parrot!"

Phil got to a table and a lamp he made out on it in time to apply the dwindling match to its wick. Larry regarded his face curiously. Phil had suddenly changed in manner and bearing. There was no more uncertainty about him. His lips were set tight and his glance held firm.

At the most exciting climax of a most exciting case he had called a check on himself.

Many a time Phil had seen one of Nick's most apt pupils approach a crisis with daring success, only to go all to pieces with excitement and spoil a brave finish.

A conviction now nerved him—he had struck a clew of the biggest kind—the parrot. A certainty warned him—danger might haunt every minute he wasted. Promptness, coherency, dispatch, were the essentials of the present situation.

Phil glided to the door and locked it. He was ready for business now. He fixed his eyes upon the parrot. He had backed against its cage when his hair was seized by bill or claw. That cage stood on a high stool.

The bird was a large, vicious-eyed creature, but there was a phenominally wise expression to its sidelong glance. Phil studied it deliberately. It had told him great things already: "Darley," without doubt, the name of the black-whiskered man; "A million dollar spec"—had it hit the true essence of the Leslie case? Things were growing deeper every moment.

In his precipitation to leave known quarters, the black-whiskered man had forgotten or abandoned his pet parrot. Perhaps it had not exhibited its full knowingness to him. Then again, perhaps it had, and Darley might remember it, and return at any moment to deal with a possible tale-bearer as summarily as he had dealt with the diamond-scratched pane of glass and the lurker in the sprinkler butt.

"Larry," said Phil, seizing the cage by its top ring, "go ahead. No, not the rear door, the other. There's a hall, a balustrade, two flights of stairs. Go cautiously, now."

"Like a cat," promised Larry, aglow with zeal.

"When you come out in front, signal if anybody is hanging around."

Larry started out into the dark hall. Phil followed at a safe distance. No one hindered inside, and no one looked suspicious outside the house. Phil marched forward, full of great thoughts as they reached the main thoroughfare. He based ardent hopes on the parrot, he was positive that coaxing tactics under Nick's skilful direction would lead Polly into making all kinds of startling revelations.

The bird had not let out a croak so far. It watched the lights and the crowds interestedly. Suddenly a dog, kicked by some irritable pedestrian, ran by yelping.

That started up Polly's vocal powers instantly.

The bird let out a series of imitations that made the air ring. Then it enjoyed a fit of hilarious laughter. Then it demanded, querulously, a dozen times over:

"Where's Darley? I say, Darley! Lie low, Darley! Danger in the air. Ha! ha! Ho! ho!"

Every utterance made Phil's heart thump mightily. Such perfect intonation, such versatility inspired him with the firm belief that Polly would prove a mine of useful information before they got through with the creature. He listened raptly.

"Write it down, Darley," croaked the bird next. "Number—got it? Number—write it down, Number Twenty-two—whoop!"

Phil's eyes had begun to dilate with eagerness. The bird was giving a definite direction. Surprise gave way to practical procedure, however, for looking up, Phil saw what had diverted Polly's line of conversation.

A couple of intoxicated men blocked the walk. Polly was looking them over amusedly.

"Ha! ha! Jig, jug, jag! Shocking example! Hic! whoop'er up! We'll have them stuffed. Go on, now. Police!"

"What's that?" demanded one of the inebriates, making a dash for Phil.

"Hold on, mister, he didn't say anything to you," interposed Larry, putting himself forward as the champion of the occasion.

"Inshulted us," maundered the other man. "Heard him dishtinctly."

"Shut up!" croaked the parrot.

The inebriates unlocked arms solemnly. They never saw the parrot, and they squared off to make a descent on Phil.

"Let me pass," spoke the latter, annoyedly. "Don't you see it's the parrot in this cage that has been doing the talking? It don't know any better."

"Teach it, then!"

Phil did not anticipate what ensued, and was not prepared for it. The affronted inebriate raised his foot and it met the cage.

That receptacle was carried sheer out of Phil's hand, went up in the air, landed

on the hard stones of the street with a crash that made Phil thrill with dismay.

Its thin metal bands crushed in, the bottom was unsnapped and rolled to a distance. Phil darted forward to succor Polly. A rising fluff of feathers struck his face, eluded his grasp, and went sailing aloft. He followed it with frantic gaze.

The parrot, apparently uninjured, had risen promptly like some phoenix from the wreck. It flew up the face of a five-story building, and thirty feet aloft struck an eave pipe, and began clawing its way still upward.

"Go on, now!" it shouted down shrilly. "Catch a weasel, will you? Where's Darley? Meet you at twenty-two. Ha! ha! Number twenty-two, come on. Get out! Ha! ha! Ho! ho!"

Phil was nearly dancing with vivid emotions. The precious bird was getting away. That tantalizing direction—would it never be finished!

"Twenty-two what? Oh, I wonder twenty-two what?" uttered Phil, fervently.

"Hold on, I'll get it," spoke up Larry. "You know what Mr. Carter calls me—a regular climbing monkey."

"But—"

"You stay down to watch if it flies some where else. I'll get it if it can be got."

Larry ran to where the ropes that worked a store awning hung. He seized these and did not belie the reputation he had hinted at.

Phil watched him reach the fire escape and begin a nimble ascent. Polly saw him coming, and essayed a flight, yet it seemed that as the bird circled over the top cornice the doughty Larry was fairly over it as well.

Phil fidgeted as a minute went by. When two had passed he could stand inaction no longer. He started to follow his late companion's lead, but, the awning ropes in his grasp, a hollow, yet distinct, call halted him.

"Phil!"

"Hello!—oh, Larry! He's calling down through the fire-escape pipe."

"If you hear me, whistle."

Phil puckered his lips and ejected a sig-

nal call that he was sure would reach the roof overhead.

"Listen: Bird flown to next building. It's going to be a race over the roofs, but I'll get it. I'll tire it out in time."

"Plucky Larry!" commented Phil.

"Listen. It's jabbering like a jackdaw. Say, Phil, you was terrible anxious over that twenty-two. Well, I've got it. If it's a clew to follow, whistle and get. If not, come and help me catch the bird."

"Yes! yes!" whispered Phil, ardently, to himself.

"Twenty-two Clancy. It's spoken it a dozen times—twenty-two Clancy."

"Glory!" shouted Phil, carried out of himself he scarcely knew why, perhaps by one of those thrilling intuitions which Nick had so often told about, that serve as a guide-post to the groping and undecided mind.

He was so enthused with the conviction that he had at last found the key to the situation, one twist of which might open a door leading into the very heart of the great Leslie mystery, that he whistled with a will and darted from the spot his old impetuous, unrestrained self again.

"I've found the right road—I feel it, I know it," he murmured. "'Clancy.' It must be the little avenue over near the river. Who's there? What's there? Leslie? His hiding-place, or rather prison place? Ought I to tell Mr. Carter? No, he said to act independent in a case of urgency, and the plain, prompt duty of the moment is to find out what twenty-two Clancy has to put forth concerning the case in hand."

Phil made the two miles before him in just twenty-five minutes, stopping once.

It was in a dark doorway. He went into the obscurity Phil Marcy, and came out some one else. It was no elaborate disguise that he hastily donned, but in the night time two patches of false hair on the cheek, the substitution of a low, heavy-peaked cap for a natty high one, makes a distinctive variation in one's appearance.

Phil entered Clancy street as the clocks were striking ten. It was an unsightly spot. Every other house was a saloon, and roystering sailors and dock hands seemed to be their best customers.

Twenty-two was a puzzler to Phil. At

first he could not believe his senses, and then he decided that the parrot had played him a trick.

It was a little one story, one-roomed structure. It had at one time been a coal office; a battered sign showed that. Its front window was boarded up, its side one had two panes out, and altogether the place looked more like the possible haunt of some homeless tramp than a point of importance in the plans of a man who was working "a million dollar spec, and no mistake."

Phil, however, had learned the vital lesson that it is never well to trust entirely to appearances. He therefore made sure no one was observing him, and passing the structure he dropped over the walk to the open space at its edge.

Behind ran a splintered roofing intended at some time in the long past to shelter piles of coal and wood. It ran up to a rear door of the office. Phil softly handled the knob. It turned, and he stood inside of the place.

He held his breath and never moved. An electric street lamp shone directly through the side window. Its rays brightly illumined one side of the single room. They revealed an old straw mattress, and on it a human being.

"A man," murmured Phil, intensely moved; "no, a boy, but a foreigner. What? Indian? Malay? Japanese? He's asleep. Now who is he, and what am I to do?"

The illumined face was copper-hued, but finely chiseled. It looked youthful, but worn, worried and hunger-traced. Phil drew nearer. Was this friend or enemy of the black-whiskered man, Darley? Did the slumberer cut any figure in the Leslie case, or had the parrot repeated something it had heard casually having no bearing whatever on Darley's plots?

"I must wake him up," decided Phil. "Wonder who he is? If he knows nothing about the Leslie case—oh, but he does!"

Phil spoke these words with a sudden shock. A roving glance had rested on the breast of the sleeper. There, in some way dislodged from the neck, lay the coil of a fine steel chain, and wired to this was a tiny, triangular piece of metal.

It was part of some oriental coin, appar-

ently a keepsake, a talisman. More than that, an element of powerful importance in the Leslie case. This Phil suddenly knew, and he groped in his pocket and drew forth its exact counterpart.

Staring from it to the other, comparing them, marveling, he wondered how it was that when two weeks previous he picked up the quaint-looking fragment of metal in the room formerly occupied by the missing broker, he had failed to attribute any importance to it.

"Mr. Carter would have known better," declared Phil now. "I'll remember the next time that a crooked pin, a paper wad, nothing is too infinitesimal to be beneath notice. Here is a discovery that means something, surely. The coin pieces are identical. Then in some mysterious way this boy is connected with Arnold Leslie. Hello!"

Phil drew back abruptly. There was a stir and a short sharp breath.

The figure on the mattress sat bolt upright, and a pair of unnaturally searching eyes gazed with challenge and suspicion into Phil's own.

CHAPTER V.

SEALED LIPS.

"Hello!" repeated Phil, for want of anything more appropriate to say.

The lithe figure began to back, but its eyes never left Phil's face. There was something grewsome in pose and silence. For all the world, to Phil's mind, the situation resembled a stage climax, the clear radiance focused from outside on the strong face before him supplying a true calcium effect.

The stranger got to his feet. Then, one hand stealing inside his loose blouse front, he concentrated his gaze watchfully, unblinkingly, on the startled Phil.

"I've come—I've come to have a talk with you," began Phil, a little taken aback by the uncompromising manner of the other.

The latter neither moved nor spoke. He did not even seem to listen.

"I'm friendly to you," proceeded Phil. "See here, don't stare so dreadfully, but say something, will you?"

Still the copper-hued features never changed in their statue-like sameness. Their owner made a quick movement,

however. It was to shake his head, to point to his mouth, to make a distressed sweep of his hand and to utter half a dozen words rapidly—words Phil knew at once were in some obscure foreign tongue.

"I say!" he breathed, in some dismay—"he don't understand me, he can't talk English. Here's a muddle. Oh, my friend—Darley!"

Phil was sorry he uttered that name the minute he spoke it. Upon his companion its effect was electrical. Like a tiger the latter sprang forward. In a trice Phil was tripped flat to the mattress, and to his shrinking gaze the gleaming eyes of his assailant and a thin stiletto blade he brandished glowed with rivaling brilliancy.

"No friend to Darley, that's sure," muttered Phil. "Hold on. Don't strike. Wait! Look!"

It was certainly an inspiration that struck Phil just here, for it probably saved his life. The dangling coin piece at the neck of the foreigner suggested it. Phil struggled one arm free from the down-pressing grasp of his captor; he raised the counterpart of the little metal fragment.

The effect was magical. A marvelous change overspread the face of the foreigner. He allowed the knife to drop from his hand, he withdrew his clutch from a supposed enemy. The fierce sparkle in his eyes died down, and they assumed instead a rapt expression.

He arose and then dropped to one knee. Tremulously, timorously, with unmistakable reverence he drew nearer to the extended coin piece. Then he kissed the end that held it, bowed his head, and in that attitude of subjection seemed to indicate that he was the slave of the possessor of that magic talisman.

"Well!" breathed Phil in one wondering gasp. "Now, what am I to figure out from this?"

Two things he was sure of; his companion hated Darley; he could not understand the English language. A dozen inquiries on the tip of his tongue, conjoined with curiosity and excitement, he realized that talk would be useless, yet to unlock those mute lips, what lightening revelations might not flow from them!

"I've come to a block," cogitated Phil, "but I've made a star hit, sure. I'll take no risks this time—it's home, Mr. Carter soon as I can make it. Come."

His companion did not understand the word perhaps, but he guessed out the significance of the motion that accompanied it. Without demur or delay, he followed Phil outside.

A cab had just deposited a roystering duo in front of a saloon. Phil engaged it and gave a quick direction.

It was almost painful, the intensity with which the foreigner kept his eyes on Phil's face during the brief drive. Their expression was eager, pitiful, abashed, by turns. What mighty thoughts might be welling up for utterance in that active mind!

"Mr. Carter will make him talk. He'll find a way," declared Phil, confidently. "The parrot, the foreigner—what queer, unheard of finds for a night's work!"

Phil ushered his companion eagerly into the big room where the detective entertained his associates evenings, glad to discover that Nick had not yet retired. Two of the pupils were also present. They joined Nick in a wondering glance at the rather dilapidated-looking Phil and his odd-appearing companion.

Phil began his story promptly. He narrated graphically what had occurred within the past three hours. He was gratified, as he saw arise in the eyes of the old master that speculative, intense look, which always characterized Nick Carter when he was deeply interested.

"Yes, Phil," commented the detective, when the brief story was ended, "you have done some wonderful work."

"I hope so, sir."

"This foreigner knows something of Darley, the main mover in the Leslie case."

"Everything, I believe. If we can only make him talk!"

"That's easy."

"Is it?"

Nick touched a bell. A grizzled old fellow, his special messenger, appeared. Nick wrote a few lines hastily, and folded the note.

"Professor Warrington," he spoke. "You know where he lives? If he is

asleep, wake him up. Tell him I must see him here at once."

The messenger departed with a shadow's swiftness. There was not much conversation indulged in during his absence. Nick had taken a book from a case, a volume of ethnological lore, and was looking it over, comparing its presentation of face types of different nations with the mute, restless one before him, and Phil watched him eagerly.

Finally the messenger returned, ushering in a hearty-voiced old gentleman who greeted the detective effusively.

"Boys," announced the latter, "you have all heard of Professor Warrington? He is authority on the language and personnel of all nations," and then Nick engaged in a brief, low-toned conversation with the professor, who, approaching the foreigner, studied his face closely. "I would say that he comes from some of the Asian islands," remarked Warrington. "Ai ya? No. Oo-to-rah? Not a sign of response. Can you get him to speak in his own tongue?"

Phil touched the foreigner on the shoulder. He went through an industrious pantomime, he tried hard to make the man understand that he wanted him to speak, and the latter, evidently painfully desirous of acceding, finally uttered several strange-sounding words.

"Good!" nodded the professor. "Gut-teral and the vowels prolonged. Of Malay origin, that is sure."

Then ensued a scene that kept Phil on tenter-hooks of hope and suspense. The professor ran through a dozen different dialects. Sometimes the foreigner's eyes brightened, as if a word, an accent sounded familiar, but he shook his head dumbly, and at last Warrington announced.

"I give it up, Mr. Carter. I have exhausted my vocabulary."

Phil looked dreadfully disappointed. He paced up and down the long room in a worried way as Nick was showing his friend from the house.

The foreigner continued to watch him with poignant devotion—intense solicitude. It was apparent that he comprehended the situation, that he would almost give his life, if needed, to meet the wishes of the possessor of a coin fragment in-

vested with undeniable importance in his estimation.

He crept up to Phil, all distress and humility. He caught his hand and stroked it, tears in his eyes, as if deploring his unfortunate ignorance.

"It's all right, old fellow," cheered Phil. "We'll find a way to unloosen your tongue yet, eh? What now?"

A glad, shrill cry that was electrifying rang suddenly from the foreigner's lips.

Eyes eloquent with delight and intelligence, his long, slim finger outstretched significantly, the dumb foreigner was staring into Nick Carter's cabinet of curiosities.

CHAPTER VI.

THREADS IN THE DUST.

"What now?" asked Nick, re-entering the room at this moment.

"Something attracted his attention there," explained Phil.

The speaker pointed to the cabinet before which the foreigner had halted with eyes fixed enrapt upon its contents and fingers working nervously.

That case was a wonderful one, and Nick looked gratified at what he counted at first flush to be the same admiration which was infused into every observer.

It not only contained criminal mementoes that were priceless, but a collection of every weapon known to armorer or explorer, from the stone adze of early Britain down to the palm dagger of the famous Mafia of New Orleans.

"He sees something particular, I think," suggested Phil.

Nick unlocked the cabinet and swung open its doors. Instantly the foreigner darted forward. From its middle shelf containing a confusing array of blades and weapons, he snatched up a rusted knife with a peculiar spiral point, gloated over its pearl mottled ornamentation, and pressed it fervently to his lips as if it was a familiar reminder of his native land.

"Ah!" commented Nick, simply.

He gently drew the weapon from the foreigner's hand and inspected the little paper tag pasted upon its handle.

"Seven hundred and sixteen," he read, and his face brightened. "Well, Phil, we've struck the right trail at last."

"What do you mean?" fluttered Phil.

"He'll talk now."

"I don't understand yet."

"Number seven hundred and sixteen is labelled 'hunting-knife from Borneo—special, race of the Negriticdyaks.' His language is an obscure Malay dialect. Solved, sooner than I thought."

"Solved?"

"Inside of an hour we'll have this man telling all he knows."

"I don't dare hope it."

"You can."

Again Nick Carter touched the bell, again his grizzled messenger appeared.

"You know where Malay George's boarding-house is?" questioned the detective. "Yes? Take this note there. He will send a man back with you."

The ensuing twenty minutes seemed as many hours to the suspenseful Phil. He could not keep still. There was a latent excitement present with all others in the room as well. Even the foreigner was restive, and seemed to comprehend that something of importance was about to materialize, for he kept his eye on the door, and he looked eager as it finally opened and the detective's messenger ushered a squat, dark-browed fellow into the apartment.

"From Malay George?" inquired Nick.

"Yes."

"You understand the Negriticdyak dialect?"

"Like a book, mate," assented the man, with a nautical hitch of his trousers. "Lived with them for two years. What's the lay?"

"Make yonder man talk, and translate to us what he says."

The new-comer rolled his eyes over the foreigner. Then he projected a jargon-sounding sentence. A cry of joy escaped the lips of the dyak, a stream of glad trembling words rushed forth. He grasped the hand of his interlocutor, he darted a look of gratitude and devotion at Phil.

"His name is Nepa," reported the sailor, in a lapse in their talk.

"He was a servant to Wang Tah, Chinese messenger from Pekin, hired a year since to come to America and seek out a missing nobleman named Prince Hoy," was the next information imparted.

"Prince Hoy had been murdered by the Chinese Highbinders in San Francisco.

His ashes, deposited in an urn by friends, together with jewels, amounting to a king's ransom," translated the sailor, "Wang Tah started to convey to China. The Highbinders learned of this. The greatest calamity that can happen to a Chinaman is to be buried away from his native land. His soul is lost, then. The Highbinders determined to prevent the shipment of the casket; they sought to secure the urn and scatter the ashes of an enemy to the four winds of heaven. They learned also of the immense treasure in Wang Tah's keeping. Pursued, he sought to break the trail by crossing the continent and starting from New York for China, but the formidable confederation at his heels had agents everywhere. In New York he found his life was still menaced, his footsteps dogged."

"But where does Arnold Leslie come in?" inquired Phil.

"He says that his master went to a business man here. He knows not his name, but it was a broker, who for years had been the accredited American agent for the tea house which formerly employed Wang Tah. With him the caskets were deposited for safe keeping."

"Arnold Leslie," whispered Phil to the detective.

"Beyond all doubt," nodded Nick.

"The next day—this was about a month ago—his master did not return to the secluded spot where they were hiding, where you found him to-night. Since then, reduced to poverty, he has been awaiting his return. He believes he was murdered. His master had warned him against the American agent of the Highbinders, one Darley."

"And this piece of coin?" inquired Phil, producing the metal fragment he had found in the room of the missing broker.

"A triple talisman, a part of which Wang Tah told him he had given to the broker, informing Nepa that whoever he saw with that he could trust."

"The case is plain," spoke Nick to Phil. "The Highbinders have murdered this Wang Tah. Nepa here they considered too ignorant to be worthy of notice—poor, faithful fellow! They found that Arnold Leslie had the caskets. They sought to secure them. Undoubtedly his

return, a prisoner, to his old room, was occasioned by his kidnapers, who wished to search for what he has hidden somewhere else and will not produce. You have narrowed the chase down to a fine point, Phil—you have run your clews to cover."

"I have found the motives."

"Now locate the people behind them."

Phil looked anxious. The hardest part of his task lay before him, and he realized it. He had no ordinary combination of criminals to deal with, but a coterie of conspirators, behind whom wealth, shrewdness and influence were bulked.

And then his professional zeal flamed up. He recounted what difficulties he had already overcome, and with what glowing results. He comprehended what a feather it would be in his cap to run the mystifying Leslie case to a triumph and finish. He remembered that Nick Carter had designated him as his cleverest graduate.

"I'll do it?!" said Phil, simply but confidently.

CHAPTER VII.

"ON A SHADOW."

"I've got a theory——"

"Keep it, Burt."

"And I've got something else."

"What?"

"Come here, and I'll show you."

It was the evening ensuing to that which had seen Phil Marcy capture two remarkable and valuable clews to the great Leslie mystery.

Himself and Burt Newton were seated at the window of a restaurant near Madison square, and for over an hour one had been watching every passer-by, and the other every person who had entered the restaurant rooms of the place.

Within twenty-four hours the methods of running down the Leslie mystery had been somewhat modified, for Nick Carter himself had taken a hand in the case.

He had bestowed the half-famished dyak in a comfortable room, had left the house for a few hours, had returned looking complacent and satisfied, and had insisted that Phil go to bed and get a good night's sleep.

"Preparatory to as vigilant a spell as you'll care for, I'll guarantee," he promised, "I'll give you some explicit ad-

vice to-morrow," and Phil rested on this and decided to follow present directions.

When he awoke in the morning, he learned that Larry had come trailing in about midnight with two feathers and badly-tattered attire to show for a four hours' pursuit of the parrot, and that Burt had appeared somewhat later, never referring to the Leslie case, and, therefore, presumably disappointed in some "theory" he had doubtlessly been following up in connection with the same.

Nick got the three together about noon and gave them quite a talk. He went over the Leslie case up to date, and concluded by saying:

"I want to see you boys make a hit on this affair, and there is no reason why you should not work together. Here are two addresses. Two of you go to the first at dusk and watch, another go to the second."

"Watch for what?" asked Burt.

"Darley."

"Oh!"

"I have satisfied myself that these are two of his old haunts. Now then, remember one thing: If this man was arrested to-morrow, we couldn't prove a single point against him. You must find his colleagues first, you must get at Arnold Leslie. When you discover him to a certainty, report to me as quickly as possible."

To the first place mentioned Phil and Burt had proceeded, while Larry had gone to the other point designated by the detective—a road house way up at the other end of the city.

Phil began to grow tired and restless an hour passed by. Burt's offer of a theory, followed by a promise to show him something else, aroused him, however, and he got up from his chair and stared in the direction his companion was pointing.

"Theory is, Darley don't give a damn for all the police in New York," he managed to edge in, "for there he isn't he?"

"Sure as fate! You've got an excellent idea of description, Burt."

Phil looked across the apartment across the hall beyond it. At a table in the next room sat the object of his interest. There was not the slightest ch-

in his apparel or beard. Did Darley suppose pursuit had ended with Phil's boxing up in the sprinkler butt of the night previous, or had he played his game out and so covered his tracks that he was not afraid of detection?

"That's him, that's Darley?" asked Burt.

"Yes."

"There's no mistake?"

"None in the world. I'd know those black whiskers anywhere."

Pro. "Very good. When he gets through with his supper, he's going to leave here, isn't he?"

"That's good theory, naturally, Burt," smiled Phil.

"Oh! don't grin. You don't know it all. We've got to follow him. I read that man."

"Do you?"

"Yes; bold as a lion when he's safe, but slippery as an eel when he isn't. Take my word for it, when he leaves here he'll lead us no ordinary shadow. He'll spot us if we get too close. I'm going to fix all that."

"Are you?"

"Sure."

Phil was a little surprised at Burt's next movement. He walked straight across the hall and squarely up to the table where Darley sat. He even put his hand on the back of Darley's chair, glancing around the room as if seeking somebody. Then he returned to Phil, looking dreadfully important and confident.

"I've fixed it," he announced.

"Fixed what?"

"You'll see soon"

Darley got up, his meal finished, paid for it, strolled to the door leisurely, and then, after a scrutinizing glance at the face of every lounge in sight, started down the street.

The boys were after him promptly. He entered the first poorly-lighted thoroughfare he came to.

"That's what I did," remarked Burt, pointing as they rounded the corner.

"Eh? What? Say, good!" cried Phil, with honest admiration for his comrade's cleverness. "Phosphorus?"

"Yes," nodded Burt, rather disappointed that his companion had so

promptly guessed the facts. "Tipped a bottle of it on his coat when I leaned on his chair. Divide—you take the other side of the street now."

Phil had no difficulty in keeping that splotch of phosphorescence on the back of the man's coat in view. It was a valuable guide where street lamps were few and far between.

The black-whiskered man led them a tiresome chase. It ended at a lodging-house. The man entered it. The two trailers came together opposite it and stood staring blankly at its dark front.

"Not much in this shadow," vouchsafed Burt.

"We've run him to cover, haven't we?" propounded Phil.

"That's so. There he is in his room, taking off his coat. He's going to bed."

The black-whiskered man had entered a room fronting on the street, had lit the gas, and, without taking the pains to lower the shade, had removed his coat.

It looked as if the chase for the night was ended. Phil was chagrined. He reflected over the situation.

"See here, Burt," he suggested, "you wait here, will you?"

"If you say so."

"If that fellow really goes to bed and don't come out again in an hour or so, go to Mr. Carter and report."

"All right. What are you up to?"

"I'll go and call Larry off a watch that is useless, seeing that Darley is here—incidentally, perhaps, nose around the place he's shadowing."

Phil started away, made for the nearest elevated station, and was soon speeding for the second address Nick had given them.

It was not difficult to locate the old road house, a dilapidated haunt with a summer garden attachment, and evidently long fallen into disrepute, for Phil made out a hard-looking crowd on its veranda and in the main barroom.

Just as he was nearing it, a close cab started away. A light flashed across its window, and Phil gave a start and a stare.

"Impossible!" he muttered, rooted to the spot in stupefaction. "Impossible!"

The cab was far out of reach before he recovered his composure. He had seen

plainly and unmistakably in the vehicle—the black-whiskered man!

"It was Darley," he insisted. "Don't I know him? And yet I left him less than forty-five minutes ago in the room Burt is watching miles away. I came here fast as any one could. What does it mean?"

Phil gave up the riddle. He looked around for some trace of Larry. He could probably enlighten him somewhat.

But Larry was no where in sight, and Phil sauntered up to the veranda carelessly, into the crowded barroom, glided to a vacant chair near a window, and, apparently unnoticed, prepared to keep eyes and ears wide open for a spell.

There was a piano over at one end of the room. At it some one was idly strumming. Near it at a table, smoking, drinking, heads close together in confidential confab, were two men.

Phil lingered, although the tobacco and the liquor fumes were not at all to his liking. This was one of Darley's haunts. Among the throng were undoubtedly some of his fellows. It was his duty to watch. Something definite might be picked up here.

Darley has probably been here to see some one—wish I knew who," reflected Phil. "Hello, there! That's familiar. Why, it's the tune the boys whistle when they get near Mr. Carter's, to announce their coming."

Plunk-plunk-plunketty-plunk — with one finger the person at the piano was picking out the air in question. He repeated it, banging the terminal notes in such good imitation of the usual emphatic expression given to them by Phil and his comrades, that Phil stopped listening and took to staring.

"Well, I declare!" he uttered, under his breath.

The musician wheeled around on the piano stool. He poised, half the circle completed, but only for an instant, time sufficient to fix a sharp, meaning look on Phil's face. Then his back was again exposed to Phil's wondering glance.

"It's Larry!" he breathed, "little Larry, but what a get-up!—disguised till his best friend would hardly know him. He's following up Mr. Carter's rule seven with a vengeance—'never recognize an

associate when in action.' But that significant look, and that tune! What's he trying to tell me, anyway?"

Thumpplunk went the piano again. Then, sharply, definitely, four clear notes, repeated twice, and each time the same.

"Aha!" suddenly ejected Phil, understandingly.

"F-A-C-E."

Larry had spelled out a word on the ivories, and Phil was musician enough to read the notes, cracked and tinpanned, as was their expression.

"Face? What does he mean? One of the two men at that table near him? The one facing me? Yes, that's it."

Phil was certain of it now, for a variation in Larry's musical theme took place.

"B-A-G."

The notes were struck that represented those letters, and glancing closely at the environment of the man he supposed Larry was indicating, Phil saw a valise. Larry began a new strain.

"B-E-D."

Phil was puzzled. There was no couch in the room. What did the signalist mean?

Just there Larry got up from the piano. He never looked at Phil, but he pointed a finger at the ceiling. Then he proceeded straight to the door and left the place.

"Does he mean up stairs?" ruminated Phil. "Some one up stairs? Say!" he supplemented with a start, "he's told me plain as plain could be to watch the man facing me with the bag. He's told me plain as plain can be, connected with him, is some one up stairs. In bed. It can't be Darley. I saw him leave just now. Then—why!" palpitated Phil, with a decided thrill, "suppose it should be Arnold Leslie!"

CHAPTER VIII.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

Phil promptly started toward the piano seat which Larry had just vacated.

The direction from his little friend was unmistakable. Some decided interest in the Leslie case revolved around the man at the table.

Phil hoped to take his seat at the piano without attracting the attention of

the two men. Near them, he might have a chance to overhear some of their conversation.

They almost instantly arose, however. One remark made by the man with the bag set Phil on the sharp *qui vive*.

"Wagon's ready and time to start. Let's get our passenger aboard and mosey for the pigtails."

Phil analyzed that sentence electrically. Passenger. Did they mean Arnold Leslie probably a prisoner up stairs? Pigtails. Oh, that described the Highbinders to a T!

Both men crossed to a door leading up stairs. It closed after them. Phil was nerved to boldness. His hand was on the knob sixty seconds later.

"Drop that!" ordered a gruff voice.

Phil drew back. A pugnacious-looking individual, seated in a chair against the wall directly near the door, and apparently dozing a minute previous, arose with the words, bending his beetle brows suspiciously on Phil.

"Certainly," announced the latter, accommodatingly edging away.

"What you up to, anyway, hey?" demanded the man, following him up. "I've seen two of you kid fellows nosing around here, and I don't like your looks. That's no mustache. Alert, boys, here's a spotter!"

Quick as a flash the man reached out a hand, tearing from Phil's upper lip the patch of false hair decorating it. His call brought several men to their feet.

"You'll answer some questions, I'm hinking," observed the man, making a grab for Phil.

He caught his arm as Phil bolted up against a table where a man was eating. Phil grabbed up a bottle of some kind of meat sauce and poised it. The man dodged and thereby lost his grip. Phil made a bounding dive clear across the table. He landed on both feet firmly enough, but he found he was wedged in to a corner, not only by chairs and tables, but by several rough-looking fellows who had arisen from them with menacing faces.

The nearest avenue to the open air was an open window just behind him. Phil leaped to it and through it.

He heard a general startled cry in the

room abandoned as he landed ten feet down. He echoed it with a forcible:

"Whew! What have I struck this time?"

As shown in the dim night light, a high-wired inclosure. In its centre was a kind of kennel. From it proceeded a roar, and Phil glared as out ran some brisk animal.

"A bear," he muttered, halting. "Trick? Pet? No, savage and snarling." Whack!

There was only one thing to do, and Phil promptly did it—to use the single weapon he had ready, the bottle he had caught from the table.

It was a frail means of defense, but it answered the purpose capitably. Its full force under ordinary circumstances would not probably have affected the snarling brute any more than a fist touch, but, squarely striking the centre of the creature's forehead, it broke with a sharp pop.

Whatever it contained, there was just enough of a vinegarish, peppery mixture to drive the animal frantic.

As the smarting liquid streaked down its face, into eyes and jaws, its great paws, extended to tear at the intruder, underwent a variety of spasmodic air beatings instead. It dropped summarily, and burrowing its tortured head in the ground, roared and wriggled there.

Phil saw a spellbound crowd at the window. He put across the inclosure, up the wire netting; he scrambled over its top iron binding, and stood in the garden proper of the place.

That he would be pursued, at least sought for, he did not doubt. He had awakened the suspicions of the men in the place, and they would be on the alert.

Near by was the stable yard, and, driven directly up to a side door beyond which a staircase showed, was a prim box wagon with a natty horse attached, and, somehow, instantly Phil decided that this had some connection with the "passenger" and the "pigtails" he had heard alluded to not five minutes since.

"Some one is coming around from the barroom," he reported, after a quick glance. "I can see him through the netting. 'I don't want to be shut out from watching, and I won't. Can I hide where

I can keep that wagon in view? The stables are too far; inside the house I don't dare venture, but here we are, and snug as silk."

The stable yard was being paved with wooden blocks. Half of the work was done. The set planking beyond was littered with cedar cubes, and some children had been playing house with a lot more, for a first-class imitation of a Hottentot hut stood not ten feet away from Phil.

A door, or rather low half-circular hole, had been left near the bottom. Through this Phil almost dove, squared around glanced out anxiously, saw the fellow who had challenged him inside looking all about the yard for him, and decided that his hiding-place was not suspected.

The man re-entered the house disappointed in his search. A few minutes later Phil craned his neck eagerly as he heard lumbering footsteps beyond the open doorway near the wagon.

Then two men came down the stairs. They carried something muffled up—a human being, Phil guessed. This burden they deposited in the wagon box, and one of the men got in near the back. The other sprang to the high front seat, grabbed up the lines, snapped the whip, and the spirited horse darted forward as if shot from a bow.

"The two fellows I was watching," murmured Phil, in an intense strain of excitement. "That's their 'passenger' they've just loaded in. Here's a crowd to follow, if I'm not mistaken. Pshaw!"

Phil started to crawl out of his covert with such urgency that he precipitated a catastrophe.

An accidental knock of his elbow jarred a keystone block, and down about his head came the whole frail structure.

Phil struggled up like a Samson amid ruins, unmindful of a dozen painful scrapes and bruises. He lost little time in darting across the yard.

The wagon had reached the street and was circling around the corner into the public highway. He put after it full tilt.

His eager eyes expanded as he turned that corner a minute later. Then, fifty feet down the street, he checked himself with a cry of dismay.

There was not a break of lane, side

street or alleyway for five hundred yards ahead, and that distance the fastest horse on the turf could not have covered during the moment the vehicle had been out of his view.

Yet, magically, mysteriously, wagon, horse, driver, attendant and passenger had vanished completely.

CHAPTER IX.

PRESTO, CHANGE!

Phil had never in his life been more startled and puzzled. He stood fairly gaping.

"It's evaporated!" he projected. Certainly the vehicle he had so promptly followed was nowhere in view. There was no break in the tree-lined road through which it could have dodged, there was no crowd of other vehicles to shield or obscure it.

On the whole clear stretch of highway a single wagon was plodding toward Phil. He barely noticed this, for his mind was full of that smart-appearing rig which presented so marked a contrast to it.

This one boasted a horse with unchecked head and slovenly gait, a wagon with splintered unpainted sides, a low instead of a high seat, and a driver entirely unlike the sprucely-dressed man with the valise.

Phil allowed it to pass him and turn the corner out of view. Then he stood stock still, meditating.

"A mystery of the biggest kind," he cogitated. "Now I wonder how Mr. Carter or anybody else would try to patch out this queer happening?"

Phil looked up as if he suspected some ballooning exploit, down as if he hoped to find a pit somewhere. Then he jerked his head up suddenly again.

"Phil!" sounded a hail aloft.

"Larry's voice, that!"

"It's me," vouchsafed Larry himself, sliding down from the leafy foliage.

"Quick, after them!"

"After who?"

"The wagon—those men."

"It's gone."

"No. Hurry, I tell you," persisted Larry, frantically dragging at his stolid companion's arm. "That was it."

"What was it?"

"The wagon just turned the corner—it's the same that left the road house."

"Nonsense!"

"Don't waste time, I tell you, but come on. It was a truck. The minute they turned the corner out of sight of the road house, as if afraid of being watched when leaving and followed, the man behind kicked a spring. Down flew false sides. The driver did the same. The seat fell two feet, the horse's check rein slipped. The man put on an old coat and hat. Presto change! I never saw a lighting change act that beat that."

"Well!" exploded Phil, emphatically, and with sudden enlightenment.

He realized suddenly that he was dealing with the shrewdest kind of men. Darley employed clever accomplices, that was sure.

Phil ran to the corner, followed by the excited Larry. There he halted, and his face grew long.

Way over on the next street, behind the roadhouse, he heard a sharp clatter and saw a horse dashing along at break-neck speed.

"We can't hope to catch up that lead," he muttered. "Besides, the short cut through the yard isn't open. There's half a dozen fellows lounging there. Too bad."

He determined to reach that next street, however, and ventured to lead the way past the front of the road house, Larry meantime telling him all he had found out.

The little fellow had seen the driver of the vehicle, the man with the bag, in close conversation with the black-whiskered man, Darley, who had just left as Phil arrived on the scene.

He had overheard some enlightening words, such as "Leslie," "the caskets," "the Highbinders," and had kept close to the man with the carpet bag until he had signaled Phil, then going out and stationing himself where he could watch all who left or came to the road house.

"We've lost the wagon," declared Phil, "but we'll pursue it with a few inquiries, all the same. Here, we can cut across this lot to the next street."

"Hold on!" ordered a preemptory

voice, as the two boys started to leave the sidewalk.

"It's Burt," said Larry, as that individual, breathless and perspiring, dashed up to the spot.

Burt looked flustered and mad. He panted once or twice, and then blurted out:

"Wrong theory."

"What about?" queried Phil.

"Black-whiskered man. Wasn't Darley at all."

"Say that again," ordered Phil, with a start.

"It wasn't Darley at all we followed to-night and dotted with the phosphorus, that you left me to watch."

"It wasn't?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"A blind."

"Explain yourself."

"After you left me the fellow I was watching took off his vest."

"Never mind details."

"A wig—his black beard."

Phil gave expression to a sudden conviction. The mystery of his meeting Darley at the road house immediately after leaving him miles away, under surveillance, was explained now.

"Darley planted a dummy to deceive us," he observed. "The real Darley was here. Well, it's the wagon trail now."

Phil related to their new accession what had just transpired. They crossed lots to the next street, Phil first ran up against a policeman, and describing the vehicle they were looking for asked if he had seen it.

He had, and told them so. Such a rig he had noticed turning into the road leading to the river ferry, four streets farther on.

The boys hurried their steps. They got into the street designated. Phil was making an inquiry of a sleepy German smoking in front of his bake shop, when Larry glided nimbly to his side and touched his arm.

"Look there," he directed, pointing.

A man resembling a tramp was leading a horse down the street toward them. It was limping slightly.

"Why it looks——" began Phil, peering keenly.

"It is the horse that started out with the rig—same color, and besides I remember the blue beads in the bridle rosette."

"Something has happened."

"Maybe another trick," suggested Burt, suspiciously. "The air seems full of such."

"I guess not this time," replied Phil, closely studying man and animal as they approached nearer. "The horse seems hurt."

"Say, fellies!" hailed the man leading the animal, halting just then and beckoning, and Phil went forward.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Information for a thirsty man with the first half-dollar he's earned since Christmas burning his pocket," grinned the fellow. "You see, its dis way: Nigh de ferry two guys was unhitching dis horse and hitching up anoder horse dey'd borrowed. Dis one had stumbled, shed a shoe, and hurt his knee, see?"

"I understand," nodded Phil, eagerly.

"Half a dollar for me to lead dis horse back to Lundy's road house. See?"

"Well?"

"I've got mixed on directions. Do you know where it is?"

"We've just come from there. The man who gave you the horse was rather stout but pale-faced, wasn't he?"

"Why, you know him!"

"I guess I do."

"Maybe—say, youse ain't going back to Lundy's and couldn't take the horse off my hands, could you?" pleaded the thirst-tormented tramp. "You see, I'm not used to long walks."

"I guess we could," answered Phil, with promptness. "We'll attend to the horse."

The tramp cut a caper of delight, raised his head like a sailor sniffing the sea breeze, and dove for the nearest saloon.

Phil stood thinking how he could turn this new adventure to some advantage.

The horse moved restively. Then, no one holding its trailing strap, it turned squarely around and started back down the street in the direction from which it had come.

"Stop it—this way is Lundy's," spoke Larry to Burt, who was nearest.

"No," dissented Phil, sharply. "Boys, here's a fortunate catch, sure. The horse

don't want to go to Lundy's. That's not it's home."

"Where is it's home, then?"

"That's what I propose to find out," answered Phil, a little tremor of anticipated triumph in his tones.

"How?" asked Burt.

"By letting the horse go where it likes, and following it."

CHAPTER X.

INTO A LABYRINTH.

The horse started back the way it had come, slowly and limpingly. One shoe had been wrenched off roughly, and the knee above was slightly cut and bleeding.

"Those fellows must intend to go quite a distance, or they would have made the horse do," remarked Phil to his companions.

"Out of the city, you mean?" interrogated Burt.

"Yes, they were headed for a ferry."

"Maybe haste was the point?" suggested Larry.

Phil told his comrades to keep to the sidewalk. He himself walked beside the horse, allowing it free scope of progress, but keeping near enough to seem to be with it, so nobody would consider it an astray.

The animal seemed to be following a familiar route, for it plodded on without hesitation. It marched square up to the gates of a ferry.

"We're bound for Jersey," guessed Phil. "I'd like to wager we're a second section."

"Of what?" demanded Burt.

"Of the train that runs straight to the place where Arnold Leslie, a whole nest of Highbinders for all we know, will be found."

"Well, that's what we want, isn't it?" inquired Burt, trying to look important.

"It is," nodded Phil, seriously, "only it will be real work when we strike that combination."

Burt fidgeted a trifle at this, Larry's eyes sparkled. "Anywhere with Phil" was his motto, and the bigger the racket the better it suited the active little fellow.

They crossed the Fort Lee ferry. Arrived on the other side, their dumb guide started along the river, following the stream with unvarying regularity.

"I say," remarked Burt, wearily, as the tramp kept up steadily "this is getting monotonous."

"It's bound to end somewhere," observed Larry.

"Yes, but when?"

"You can go back if you like," suggested Phil.

"Me? Not much!" gruffly retorted Burt. "When I ran down the bank robbery case, I didn't sleep or eat for two whole days."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," dissuaded Phil abruptly, as Burt solaced himself by lighting a cigarette.

"Why not?"

"Business. We're on a shadow, remember. I know where a noted criminal was traced right into his den through the lighted tip of his cigar."

Burt growlingly threw the cigarette away. Then he remarked:

"Why, we're getting out into the country!"

They were, for a fact. Houses were more scattered now. At one point the horse struck a marshy flat and crossed it. Then came more hilly ground.

It must have been three hours after the horse had started on what was evidently the home stretch, when Phil aroused the drooping sensibilities of his comrades with a stimulating announcement:

"We're getting to the end of our journey."

"What makes you think so?" asked Larry.

"The actions of the horse. This is a queer place!"

There was not a human habitation in sight. Before them was a broken, hilly stretch, with the river beyond. Intervening was a queer layout that suggested the farm; yet no tillable land was discernable anywhere in the immediate neighborhood.

As many as fifty high hay-stacks spread over a ten-acre piece of ground, forming a circular group. Phil noticed that they were composed of old hay, weather-beaten and bleached as if they had stood there for years.

Between two of these, where quite a beaten track showed, the horse started, after halting and sniffing with a neigh, as if welcoming home.

"A farm," muttered Burt, disgustedly.

"We've been wasting our time following a borrowed horse to some yahoo's stables."

"I don't believe that," replied Phil. "Now then, Burt, you can take a rest. Sit down there, and keep an occasional eye out for stray comers."

"Very stray, if they come to this out-of-the-world spot."

"Never mind. You follow me, Larry," directed Phil.

He started after the horse, being guided part of the time by the vague outline of its dark body, part of the time by its crunching steps, for the intervening stacks made the route a winding one.

It seemed as if the tortuous turning would never end.

"Hist!" uttered Phil, suddenly, and he halted, and checked the comrade at his heels with a warningly outstretched hand.

"What is it, Phil?" whispered Larry.

"Voices."

"Hello! what's this?" echoed distinctly on the air, not twenty feet away.

"Why, it's the horse!" came a prompt rejoinder.

Phil fluttered. His faithful associate, nestling close to him, pressed his arm slightly but significantly.

"The two men who drove away in the wagon," he murmured.

"Yes."

One of them spoke again. He seemed to give the horse, no longer in view of the boys, a vigorous slap on its flank as he did so.

"You can't trust anybody, it seems," he grumbled. "That dratted tramp just let the animal go as soon as our backs were turned. Come, get through with your business and back to Darley."

A dead hush followed. Horse and men seemed to have departed. After a brief lapse Phil ventured to reconnoitre cautiously.

He crept from hay-stack to hay-stack, peered around them, struck a beaten path, followed it to come straight back to the spot he had started from, and sat down to rest and wipe the perspiration from his brow.

"They've gone through the stacks and come out on the other side," said Larry.

"I guess that's the way of it. Well,

we've run them down, anyway. What's that, now?" interrogated Phil, getting up briskly and sniffing the air.

"Smoke."

"It is, and—fire!"

A heavy taint was followed almost immediately by a vivid glare. It came from the point where they had entered the haystack circle.

"The bungler! the dolt!" stormed Phil, angrily.

"Eh?"

"Can't you guess? Burt."

"He's—"

"Been making up for lost time. Lit a cigarette, I'll bet, and—— Say, Larry, this is serious!"

The situation was proving so with increasing rapidity. A shower of sparks, borne aloft by a high wind, flew directly over their heads.

"Take my hand," directed Phil.

"Now make away from the starting-point of the fire. I declare! it's worse than a labyrinth," he ejaculated, two minutes later.

He could start in a definite direction straight enough, but, rounding a stack before he knew it, Phil would find himself winding back the old course again.

It looked from the glare as if the flames had gone around the outside circle of stacks like magic, and dropping sparks had fired other stacks nearer to them.

"We'll never get out of this," predicted Larry.

"Pretty badly hemmed in, I will admit," returned Phil, as calmly as he could. "Still, we must make a desperate effort to find a way."

He seized Larry's hand firmly, and again pressed forward. Suddenly his companion stumbled and went headlong against a stack, tripped by a rope.

"Ouch!" he ejaculated, setting up and rubbing his head dolorously.

"Hurt?"

"Nearly banged my brains out."

"What, on soft hay?"

"No, on hard bricks, I guess—— Hello! look here. Well! Whatever is this, I wonder?"

Larry, getting up, began poking and kicking at the haystack to ascertain what disguised object had dealt his cranium its splitting blow. Then he tore

away quick handfuls of the hay, and Phil began to share his excitement.

"The hay is a mere outside covering," declared Larry.

"Of what?"

"A brick something. A burrow in the hay," reported Larry, groping investigatively. "Iron—an iron sheet. Look there, now—a door!"

Larry had pulled away a great heap of the hay now. What it had masked was plainly revealed in the bright glare surrounding them.

Sure enough, there was the side of some brick structure, as Larry had represented, resembling a bake oven, and there, too, was an iron sheet with a catch and hinges.

"Pull it open. Look in," directed Phil.

Larry did so.

"It's a burrow, a tunnel, boards, steps, a secret entrance to some place——"

"Get in!" ordered Phil, sharply, and he gave Larry a vigorous push, and crowded in after him and slammed the door shut.

There were sparks all over him, and these he began beating out. Larry helped him, with the remark:

"Found a shelter just in time."

"Yes, but we'll be roasted if we can get no further."

"We will"—click—"how's that?"—snap!

Larry had lighted a dark lantern.

"Cautious now," warned Phil. "We don't know what we're running into."

He took the lantern and cast its focused rays around them—guessing that the masked structure was the secret entrance to some den at the end of the tunnel.

A tunnel it was, narrow and descending, but head-high and straight. Phil followed it for some two hundred feet. It began to broaden. He halted and masked the lantern.

"Open air. I feel it; starlight, I see it," announced Larry. "Where are we, anyway?"

Both boys came out into what seemed to be a ravine, hidden by thick foliage, interlaced overhead with a perfect network of vines.

The glare of the burning hay-stacks

penetrated even this secluded spot, and showed the end of the gully, a level space, and just beyond it an iron door set in the solid rock.

Over this door ran out a metal arm. The arm suspended something that swung slightly and glittered with a dull, metallic linge.

"What is it?" asked the peering Larry.

"It looks like a gong," ventured Phil.

"Why, what is it doing here?"

"Yes, it is a gong—covered with queer characters. Oh, they're easy! Chinese."

"Say——"

"You're guessing it," nodded Phil.

"We've arrived. I am confident that we have discovered the secret den of the Chinese Highbinders."

CHAPTER XI.

THE KNIFE THROWER.

"The Chinese Highbinders!" repeated Larry, with a little shiver. "That sounds mighty grewsome."

"They are a formidable lot of fellows from what I hear, but we'll not back out for that," said Phil.

"Back out?" murmured Larry. "I see no way, do you?"

"I don't, for a fact. It's fire back of us, and a burglar's job ahead. Keep back, Larry. We're safe enough here for a spell—no one will cross the field till it cools down."

"Wonder where Burt is?"

"Run for home, I hope. He's more of a success at theorizing than active work. Don't show yourself now."

Phil spoke warningly and drew back himself, but he peered sharply from the mouth of the tunnel.

He had not so far noticed the other end of the ravine. Now he saw that it ran about forty feet. At its end water gleamed, presumably the river.

Coming from it, at all events, was a man—the driver of the trick wagon. He walked hurriedly up to the iron door. From its side he took a long stick, and, reaching up, he struck the gong three times.

The iron door swung back after the lapse of perhaps five minutes. Phil regarded the person who answered the summons curiously.

He wore a silken robe almost kingly in its richness. Across its breast was embroidered in gold some mystic cipher, the same as that on the gong.

His face was typically Chinese, only that his eye showed unmistakable intelligence, and his bearing was calm and dignified.

"We have just delivered the man Darley sent," spoke up the late driver of the trick wagon.

"I have seen him," announced the Highbinder in measured tones.

"You are satisfied?"

"Entirely so. My assistants received him at the hill entrance. You have been provided with a boat? Return to the city that way. We will send back the borrowed horse after the people attracted by the fire have departed. Here is the money."

He handed a bulky package to his visitor. Then he resumed:

"You will tell Darley that here his interest in the case ends. There is his reward. He will pay you. Arnold Leslie must either tell what has become of the missing caskets or die. If he tells, Darley shall be further rewarded."

Phil was a little shaken by the ominous declaration of the majestic Highbinder. The latter accompanied the vehicle driver down the length of the ravine, as if to see him depart safely.

"Larry!" whispered Phil, in an intense tone, his face very determined looking.

"Yes, Phil?"

"Are you grit?"

"For what?"

"The door to that den is open. We may never have a chance like it again. Shall we return to Mr. Carter and report, or take the risk of acting independently?"

"Phil," returned Larry, with placid confidence, "where you go, I go, and you always know best."

"Come on."

Phil let himself down noiselessly from the tunnel ledge. Larry followed. The next minute both had glided through the open door.

A cave or pit had evidently been utilized to form the secret lair of the Highbinders. Here was their high court facing, undoubtedly, on the river front, for

a flooring showed, covering the large vault-like apartment in which the boys found themselves.

"There's stairs to some building overhead," spoke Larry.

"We won't trust them just yet. This way. The man is coming back. No place to hide. A door. Ah! safe for the present."

The boys passed a threshold, and crouched low and listened. They heard the door in the rock locked noisily, and footsteps ascend the stairs they had noticed.

"Let's see where we are," suggested Larry.

Phil flared the dark lantern.

A scene of interest greeted them. A square apartment cut in the solid rock was hung with heavy draperies.

There was an altar at one end and two idols beside it, and weapons and nets, and a variety of curious articles Phil supposed to cut some figure in the superstitious mummeries of the Highbinders, littered the floor.

"Sort of lodge room, I should say —" began Larry, and paused, for there was a sound on the flooring overhead, a trap lifted, a pair of folding stairs shot down, and a man began to descend.

None too soon Phil masked the lantern and drew his companion behind the silk hangings. Crowded close to the stone wall behind, they held their breath and glanced through the parted folds of the drapery.

The new-comer went behind the altar and brought out two lamps, lit them, and sat down on the steps of the platform as if waiting for somebody.

The let-down stairs creaked again shortly. Four men descended bearing a litter. Behind it came the man the boys had seen unlock the iron door—evidently the chief Highbinder.

As they dropped the litter in the middle of the room, a form it contained started up from it.

"It's him!" gasped Phil, and Larry felt his companion shake from head to foot in a strangely agitated way.

"It's who?"

"Arnold Leslie."

"How do you know?"

"I—don't speak. What are they going to do with him?"

The man on the litter lifted a pale, wretched face to meet the gaze of the chief Highbinder, who now advanced.

"Leslie," he spoke, "we need waste no words. You have refused to deliver up to our agent, Darley, certain possessions of the dead Prince Hay which we are determined to have."

The captive, who panted as if his breath came with difficulty, closed his eyes wearily.

"In the name of an association that never failed to track down an enemy, to accomplish any set purpose, I demand those possessions: the urn containing the accursed ashes of the foe we hated, his treasures, which shall never go back to China to enrich his heirs. I demand this in the name of the Chinese Highbinders. Will you tell where you have hidden the caskets?"

"No."

"You do so, or die."

"Hark you," spoke up the enfeebled prisoner, with a quick flash of the eye, "a sacred trust was reposed in me. I shall never betray it."

"He has spoken," the chief Highbinder sternly said, turning to his companions. "Go for the executioner."

At the word, one of the litter-bearers darted up the stairs. He reappeared with a fellow built like an athlete, who simply nodded to the throng, and folding his arms over his chest, posed carelessly, ready for orders, against the wall, not five feet away from the crouching boys.

"The board," spoke the Highbinder chief—"the iron straps, the knives."

Little Larry was beginning to shake now. The tragic air of the scene was oppressive. Then, with curdling gaze, he took in a stranger scene than he had ever heard or read of.

A board three by eight feet was produced, and placed on the floor. It had holes through it here and there. Arnold Leslie was lifted from the litter to the board, and flexible steel straps were passed through the holes, around arms, waist and feet, and locked behind.

Then the board and its burden were set against the altar on a tilt just over the perpendicular.

From behind the altar one of the men next brought out a heavy bundle. Its covering was thick green plush cloth. He handed this to the man designated as the executioner.

The latter gave it a jerk across the floor, holding one end. Like a barber's cased roll of razors it unwound. It contained at least a hundred gleaming, sharp-edged, trowel-pointed knives.

"Listen," spoke the chief Highbinder, again, fixing his eye on Leslie. "We give you thirty minutes. If you reveal what we wish to know before that time is ended, your life shall be spared, you will be restored to your friends. If not, each minute, this man, our executioner, an expert knife-thrower, will come nearer, nearer, nearer to your throbbing heart with the final messenger that shall blot it out. Then——"

He went to the far side of the room, he threw back a shutter, then a grating, and as the cool night air rushed in, continued ominously:

"Two lead weights, the river, and you have passed from the enjoyments of life and the memory of your fellow men. Thirty minutes. Do your work well."

The executioner nodded grimly. With slow, solemn tread all the others followed their chief up the stairway. They disappeared, the trap closed. The missing New York broker faced his doom, and Nick Carter's youthful associates looked, quivered and wondered what would come next.

Leslie's eyes were dilating with suspense, but his lips were set firm.

"He'll never tell," whispered Larry.

"He'll never have to!" muttered Phil.

The executioner set himself in square range with the elevated board twenty feet away.

He balanced on one foot, he caught up a knife in each hand—two sparks of electricity seemed to cut the air—swish—chug!

Phil's flesh crawled. One knife quivered in the board two inches from the face of the helpless human target; the second grazed the scalp. It must have severed a lock of hair, so true was the aim.

The executioner folded his arms. He waited sixty seconds. Two more knives

he selected. It was plain to see his plan. He was setting a line of outpost steel menaces. The next would graze the flesh, the next would pin it, the last would penetrate, silence, kill, unless the victim died of horror before the awful ordeal culminated.

CHAPTER XII.

FREE!

Phil was absorbed in the tragic scene, yet his mind was working mightily all the time.

He calculated just how far the helpless Leslie was from the actual danger point, he studied his environment—the window looking out on the river, the stalwart athlete, the weapons and toggery littering the room; how far his faithful but overawed comrade could help him. He put his lips close to Larry's ear at last.

"Larry," he breathed, "we must make a move."

"If we expect to save that poor fellow, Leslie, yes."

"Soon I will creep out from here. I've got my eye on—call it a weapon; I've got my mind on a plan. The minute I speak, your name, run for that scimeter near the altar."

"You're not going to try to fight this giant?"

"Yes, and down him, too. Just obey orders."

"Always."

Swish-chug-tang!—two more knives had just been thrown; one had purposely clipped the ear of the quivering Leslie, bringing first blood as a menace of what he might expect if he persisted in his silence.

The executioner leaned over to secure two more steel messengers of death. Phil's moment for decisive action had come. He stepped from the folds of the drapery, his eyes never leaving the athlete, whose back was to him. He had planned just what to do, and he did it noiselessly.

With cat-like tread he reached a spot where a pole some eight feet long lay. To its end was attached a stout leather receptacle, around which ran some chains and cords connecting with sliding bar running the length of the pole.

Phil had at first supposed this to be a

new fangled fish or butterfly net, a grain holer, a coop, a dozen different things, until he had guessed out correctly that it was a man-catcher, an enemy-disabler, part of the Highbinder's attacking equipment, and just the thing to use to great advantage under present circumstances.

Phil lifted this. Slowly he backed, till, swinging it around, the leather bag's broad open top, reversed, hovered over the spot where the athlete would come when erect.

Just then the executioner straightened up, two new knives in his hand, and just then, with a flop and a snap, the bag descended, enveloping him to shoulders, closing with choking force about the neck as Phil at haphazard touched two catches at the side of the pole.

"Larry!" he uttered quickly, and Larry ran for the scimeter, as he had been directed. "No, no, won't need that now," concluded Phil, hastily. "Leslie—unloosen him, get him to the window-escape."

Phil directed all his attention to his catch. Like an expert fisherman fighting a trout, he pulled him forward, pushed him backward, finally floored him, snatched up a rope, wound it around his struggling arms, and had him completely helpless.

"What is this? Who are you—friends?" cried Leslie, in wonderment, as Larry ran to his side.

"Friends of friends. We have been hunting you for weeks," declared the doughty little professional. "We are some of Nick Carter's men."

Men! In soul and energy, if not in stature!

"Nick Carter?" repeated Leslie. "The great detective? Then I am safe to tell you. Do not try to help me. You cannot release these steel bands without the key. Besides, my sands of life are run out, I feel it."

"You're worth a dozen dead men," encouraged Larry, still tugging at board and fastenings.

"No, you two leave while you can. That window is open, the river bank just below, but—secure the caskets."

"Where are they?" asked Larry, curiously.

"The day after I got them I started to

put them in the safety deposit vault. It was at night. I was followed, rather pursued. I suspected the Highbinders. Endeavoring to evade them, I hid in a little frame shanty used to store fishing tackle in, on a broken-down dock just near Bigelow's factory on the river front."

"I know where it is," murmured the listening Phil.

"I dropped the caskets in a hole between the double flooring of the shanty. Get them, secure them, place them in safe hands. They are all important. Notify the police. You cannot get me free from the board——"

"Then I'll get you out, board and all!" declared the persistent Larry. "Phil, shall I do it?"

He had lifted the upper end of the board as if to drag it to the ungrated aperture looking out on the river and push it through.

Phil nodded. He had his own hands full. The man he had bagged was helpless, but he writhed, kicked, tried to call for assistance, and Phil had to drag, slam and whip him around by means of the pole to wear him out.

Larry panted and tugged at the board and its burden. He got it to the window, and then, through a herculean effort, on a balance across it.

"It's all right," he cried back to Phil, glancing out—"a sliding slant to the water not twelve feet down."

"I'll be with you in a——"

Phil did not complete the sentence. A splash did. Venturesome Larry, board and prisoner, suddenly slid from view.

Phil had not directed such bold procedure. He gave his prisoner a final jerk that jammed him into a corner where he struck the stone wall as if stunned, and then sprang to the aperture.

There was the river, twelve feet below, and there was Larry as much farther from shore.

Phil could not restrain a thrill of admiration for the plucky little fellow. Leslie, helpless but safe, lay face up on the board. Using this as a float, pushing it down stream and swimming with it, Larry was leaving the Highbinders' stronghold behind him.

Phil, about to slide down the rocky incline, hesitated. He noticed a few yards

to his right a skiff. Cautiously he trod the narrow ledge leading toward it, got directly above it, and calculated to descend over a broken slant, hasten after and take up his friends, and row them across the river to New York.

He slipped, however, just started on his descent. Over he went, slid, tumbled, and with a great numbing shock landed in the skiff.

The rough contact sent the craft shooting out from shore, but farther than that Phil for a time realized nothing, for his head had received a terrific blow where it met the rail of the boat, and the plucky boy detective lay white and still under the silent stars of the most eventful night of his life.

CHAPTER XIII.

JUST IN TIME.

"Wake up, here!"

With a shock Phil stared at a brass-buttoned presence hovering over him.

"The river police!" he cried, quickly. "Say, I've been—floating?"

"Just took you in tow. Lucky you run against us instead of some ferry. Here, ain't you going to tie up your boat?"

Phil made no reply, but sprang ashore. In one swift glance he took in his situation, in one vivid thrill decided what he must head for promptly.

He had floated down the river unconscious for a good many miles. He had been stopped, it seemed, just off Fifty-fifth street. What had become of Larry and Leslie, Phil could only surmise.

"I won't worry about them. They got adrift like myself, why not to a point of safety like myself?" mused Phil. "No, I must bulk my energies on what will be the grand finishing touch to this case, I hope. Leslie said he had the caskets in a little truck shanty on the wharf near Bigelow's factory. I've been there a hundred times; I know the identical spot. Less than a mile away. I'll foot it. Say, won't my fingers tingle to lay before Nick Carter what's left of the dead Chinese prince and perhaps a couple of millions in treasure! And Arnold Leslie? Phil, if everything comes out right, you've broke the record!"

Vivid thoughts stimulated Phil, as if

fame and fortune awaited him at the old Bigelow dock. For that point he put with renewed speed, his face hopeful and enthusiastic.

It dropped like a changing mask one minute after his nimble feet struck the rotted planking, a chilling dismay crept over every feature.

Stock still and staring vaguely, Phil looked along the dock, across the pier running out into the river.

Its planking was gone, and the little shanty where regular boatmen and fishermen were wont to store oars and nets—it was no longer there!

Phil weakened. He could see new timbers here and there. The facts of the case were patent to his quick eye. The dock was being repaired, rebuilt, and the little shanty had been swept away as useless debris.

He walked none too steadily toward a heap of spike kegs, terribly rattled. Out from a tarpaulin spread over other utilities of construction a man suddenly arose.

"No trespassing here," he announced, gruffly.

"Eh? Oh, the watchman. Maybe you can tell me," began Phil, eagerly.

"Tell you what?"

"The old pier here. There was a little shanty on the end——"

"For years."

"I want it."

"What's that? You want it?"

"Yes. See here! That's who I am."

Phil exhibited the badge with which his patron and portector supplied his pupils, to establish their standing in cases of exigency.

"Aha!" ejaculated the man. "Nick Carter. That's got the magic to open the lips and heart of any one who ever knew the kind old hero. Go ahead. You're looking for the shanty? It's gone."

"Where?"

"Glad I can tell you. Cuts some figure in one of Nick's famous cases. He makes clews of everything, from a pin head to a bridge column, so I won't be curious. We were clearing off the old timber, giving it away, the ragpickers stealing it, sending it adrift, when Dixey Brown's crowd came sailing by. Know them?"

"Young river pirates is their ambition, I believe?"

"Just. Dixey had a big string of fish. We were just going to smash up the old shanty, when he calls hold on. Long and short of it is, he spotted it as just the thing they needed for a storehouse and shelter at their summer camp down the bay. We traded on the fish basis, tipped the shanty over into the water, and they rowed away, towing it."

"When?" asked Phil, breathlessly.

"This morning."

"And where is their camp?"

The watchman directed Phil explicitly. Phil's nerves began to get on a high tension of suspense again.

He had but one more question to ask. Had the watchman a boat? No, but he could manage to get one to oblige Nick Carter, and ten minutes later Phil was rowing away, bound for a point well in mind some distance down the Jersey shore.

Phil struck the locality of the Dixey Brown camp about midnight. He had quite a search for it, but a campfire finally directed him, and when he did discover it the sound of half a dozen high voices engaged in excited altercation told him that he might have the hardest part of his venture still before him.

He gained the shelter of some straggling bushes, and came to a watchful halt.

A fire of boards and logs showed him a heap of other boards, which he recognized as part of the old truck shanty. It had certainly been broken up!

Six boys comprised the group before Phil. Five of them crowded back, looking sullen and angry.

Facing them was the evident leader of the gang, and he swung a heavy club.

"You've got your eyes on them two boxes," he was saying. "Well, you don't get them; see? Who found them in the old shanty splinters? Me."

"Ain't we pardners?" insinuated a voice.

"We are, but I'm captain, and the captain gets half always. Come, I opens them, divides pirate fashion, or I takes my wheel, boxes and all, and you gets nothing. Make your choice, gents, for Dixey Brown can lick the whole bunch if it comes to scrapping."

The boxes! Phil looked eagerly behind

the speaker. The wheel? His glance was rewarded.

"Oh!" murmured Phil, simply, but with suppressed forcefulness.

Upon an old tree stump lay two japanned boxes, and he doubted not they comprised the caskets Leslie had alluded to. Against the tree stump rested a bicycle, doubtlessly a recent acquisition of the thieving gang.

Phil edged through the bushes. He formulated a plan that had swift action for its essence.

"All right, have your way," glumly assented one of Dixey Brown's associates just then.

Dixey turned to take up the boxes and open them. A shove sent him somersaulting.

"After me!" spoke Phil.

He grabbed up the two boxes, gave his body a deft swing, looked ahead with the eye of an eagle, and, bicycle shod now, sped away like an arrow sent from a bow.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAGIC HAND.

The proudest boy in New York city ascended the steps leading to Nick Carter's headquarters just after daylight.

Of course that boy was Phil, and he had something to be proud of, for he was very sure that he was reaching home bearing a treasure burden well worthy all the risk and daring it had cost.

"Phil!" exclaimed Nick Carter greeting him with mingled surprise and pleasure.

"Oh! you are up——" began Phil.

"Been up all night. The Leslie case."

"You have been working on it?"

"Hunting down the Highbinder crowd at their river haunt."

"Who told you about that?"

"Larry."

"He is here?"

"With Leslie, safe and sound. I sent a police detail after his captors, but they took the alarm. All escaped but their chief. Too bad about the caskets. I sent to Bigelow's dock. Messenger reported shanty gone. We'll try a hunt for the fragments to-day."

"No need," announced Phil, brightly.

"Why not?"

"Here's the caskets. Mr. Carter," and Phil excitedly over his story, "what do you say to that?"

"I say—famous!" answered the veteran detective, with a look of approbation that Phil never forgot. "Ah, a new arrival. Burt."

Just then Burt bolted through the doorway, looking excited and done out. He had no hat, his face was scratched, and he was covered from head to foot with soot or coal dust.

"Where have you been?" smiled Nick.

"Leslie case," panted Burt.

Phil looked dubious.

"You rather briskly burned out one end of it last night," he remarked, dryly.

"I did, and cut for life, hating my blunderheaded obstinacy, and wild to make up for it. And I have!" proclaimed Burt, triumphantly. "Mr. Carter, I've got——"

"A theory?" insinuated Phil, his eye twinkling.

"No, not a theory!" dissented Burt, vehemently, "but—that fellow, Darley! I spotted him through watching the house where his double lodges. I knocked him down an areaway, I had a terrible tussle in a coal vault, and I've got him locked in there waiting further orders."

"Good for you!" commented Nick. "You're started on the right track. Keep it up. Now to round out the final points of the case—get Darley and the Highbinder chief into court, start the dyak back to China, and inform the public how my clever protege ran down the biggest mystery of the year. Come, Phil."

"Where?" inquired the latter.

"I want to see if those two boxes are all right. We'll show them to Arnold Leslie, in the next room."

Phil started visibly. Quick-witted Nick, watching him narrowly, smiled to himself.

"Hello!" he murmured, softly. "Don't want to see Leslie?"

"Yes—I do—but—Mr. Carter, do you know?"

"I can guess, Phil, I knew all along who you were, but I had too much con-

fidence in you to tell you so. You wanted to work out your own destiny alone. You've done it nobly. Come ahead. Eh? Want to get some of those disguise effects into the background first? All right."

Nick led the way into the next room a minute later. In a chair, looking remarkably little like "a man running out the sands of life," sat Leslie.

He listened earnestly to the detective's story of the brilliant finish to the case—he took the two boxes and inspected them.

"They are all right," he stated—"the casket containing the ashes of dead Prince Hay, the jewels out of which I shall see that liberal rewards go to the kind friends who have saved my life and honor. But the brave fellow who instigated and kept up this latter search for me——"

"Here he is."

Nick pushed Phil forward.

"My brother!" fairly shouted the astounded Leslie.

"Yes," confessed the flushing Phil. "Arnold, you remember the row we had six months ago? You told me I was idle, motiveless, a nobody. I reckon I was, for I hadn't felt the spur of an object in life then."

"Oh, I didn't mean all I said, by any means."

"No, you was angry at the way I wasted time, but I deserved your censure. It has been the making of me. First I was mad and reckless. Then I went to work. Then I heard that you was missing. I came to Mr. Carter here—dear, kind old friend—I resolved to try and find you. I have."

"What do I not owe you!" cried Leslie, effusively. "Brave fellow! You shall come back to the office, a partner, an equal——"

"No," interrupted Phil—"that is, unless Mr. Carter thinks I am not cut out for much of a detective."

"Much of a detective!" repeated Nick, and his satisfied look decided Phil as to his natural mission in life—"you are my cleverest graduate—the running down of the Chinese Highbinder crime is an unmistakable record-breaker."

"Don't praise me too much," pro-

tested Phil. "I would have groped blindly but for your advice and favor. If a big thing has been accomplished, everybody can guess where the real credit is due."

"Ah, indeed!" smiled the detective.

"Yes—to the directing influence of Nick Carter's Magic Hand.

[THE END.]

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